

Customer Service Behavior in Retail Settings: A Study of the Effect of Service Provider Personality

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Researchers have suggested that service orientation is an aspect of personality that affects service performance. Four studies were done to explore the effect of personality on customer service behavior among frontline sales personnel in a fast-food convenience store chain. An exploratory qualitative study with customers, store managers, and salespeople showed that there was consistency in the trait descriptors used to describe superior service providers. Another study validated scales that measure the personality constructs (extroversion, adjustment, and agreeableness) underlying trait descriptors noted in the exploratory study. Finally, the results of two studies showed that personality does influence customer service and that superior service providers tend to be higher in extroversion and agreeableness. The magnitude of the effect of personality in services and recommendations for future research concerning personality and performance in service roles are discussed.

By their very nature, services often involve employees interacting with customers. It is therefore surprising that the influence of service provider personality on service quality remains an underexplored area. This lack of research could, in part, be due to competing schools of thought and some skepticism regarding the usefulness of personality as a predictor of behavior. In terms of competing schools of thought, although some researchers favor personality as a predictor of behavior (Kassarjian and Sheffet 1991), the dominant view has been that personality is less relevant than a person's capacity to adapt (Weitz 1981) and that situational variables are a major force

shaping behavior (Solomon, Surprenant, Czepiel, and Gutman 1985). Skepticism in using personality to predict behavior came from equivocal results in research in consumer behavior (Kassarjian and Sheffet 1991) and sales management (Churchill, Ford, Hartley, and Walker 1985; Comer and Dubinsky 1985).

In services, the effect of fit between personality and role may be more critical. Ashforth and Humphrey (1993) argued that service roles often require emotional labor (display of expected emotion) and that there is more pressure for the service provider to identify personally with the role. Recently, there has been interest in examining personality in the services area as a predictor of service quality (Schneider and Bowen 1995). Hogan, Hogan, and Busch (1984) were the first to hypothesize a direct relationship between performance in the service role and dimensions of personality, which they labeled *service orientation* (adjustment, sociability, and agreeableness). Unfortunately, little additional work has been done to further explore the personality-service relationship.

This paucity in the academic literature is especially striking given the widespread interest in, and use of, personality instruments for selection purposes in service and retailing firms (Black 1994). Disney hires for personality but trains for skills and Rosenbluth Travel's primary selection requirement is a person who is "nice" (Henkoff 1994). Schneider and Bowen (1995), in their book *Winning the Service Game*, offer 53 "rules" for winning in services. One of those rules is the following: "Hire the right personality type (rigorously): Service disposition is measurable and predicts service effectiveness. Happier people, people who are more positive about themselves and their world, are happier at work, and more satisfied workers yield more satisfied customers" (p. 121).

Although the connection between personality and service effectiveness may be intuitively appealing, a close examination of the limited research that has examined this topic indicates that there is mixed support for such a view. The gap between academic research and practice is due, in

part, to the fact that collecting data on personality and performance is intrusive and is typically undertaken by companies only on a proprietary basis. Few of these studies have been published to enhance our theoretical understanding about the impact of personality on customer service. Important questions remain unanswered concerning personality and performance in service roles. For example, (1) Is there such a thing as a service-oriented personality? (2) What dimensions of personality are most important? and (3) What is the magnitude of the effect of personality on performance? This article addresses these three questions.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Personality and Service Roles

Kleinmuntz (1967) defined personality as "the unique organization of factors which characterize an individual and determine his pattern of interaction with the environment." Personality traits can be thought of as influencing probabilistic relationships between attributes of people and their behavior in various situations (Weiss and Adler 1990). Buss (1987) suggested that personality affects the environments people choose to embrace or avoid, the reactions they evoke from others, and the tactics they use to influence their environment. Researchers in the field of personality have recently made more compelling arguments than in the past that (a) personality constructs, while abstractions of behavior, can be measured with reasonable reliability; (b) there is stability to personality measures over time and occasions; (c) personality measures are significantly related to some nontest criterion measures of performance; and (d) personality measures are useful in predicting performance of employee candidates in certain settings (Barrick and Mount 1991; Hogan and Nicholson 1988). In the retail environment, it is useful to frame personality as a within-person factor that may affect the probability that an employee will display the proper customer service behavior routines (e.g., smiling, friendliness, etc.).

The importance of personality in services marketing and retailing can be seen by integrating the role theory point of view with the interactionist perspective in psychology. A role theory approach to services emphasizes that service providers are social actors who learn behaviors that are appropriate to the positions they occupy (Solomon et al. 1985). However, whereas role refers to uniformity in behaviors of different individuals occupying similar positions, personality refers to similarities within the behavior of an individual in various situations (Deutsch and Krauss 1965). A number of researchers have suggested that greater congruence between characteristics of people and situations creates a more productive work environment (Aronoff and Wilson 1985). Getzels and Guba (1954) were the first to conceptualize a lack of fit between personality and job as a possible source of role conflict. In short, given that personality-role incongruence may adversely affect

worker productivity and morale—which can be critical in boundary-spanning positions—a systematic study of how service provider personality influences customer service behavior seems warranted.

Research on Customer Service and Within-Person Antecedents

Customer service can be defined in the context of the broader construct of service quality. Gronroos (1990) suggested that service quality consisted of technical and functional aspects. Technical aspects of service quality refer to what is delivered, whereas functional aspects concern how service is delivered. Kelley, Donnelly, and Skinner (1990) made the point that functional service quality has to do with interpersonal contributions made by employees in the service encounter. Consistent with these formulations, the term *customer service* as used in this article refers to the functional service quality delivered by employees. Drawing on Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry's (1985) work, customer service can be said to be of high quality when customers are served in a manner consistent with their expectations regarding the interpersonal contributions that should be made by employees during the service encounter. Within the context of retail environments, this study's focus, the first level of expected customer service is showing courtesy by saying hello, how may I help you, and thank you (Berman and Evans 1995).

In examining the literature on personality and customer service, it is useful to start with Comer and Dubinsky's (1985) review of the literature concerning salesperson performance. Their review, which covered 1923 to mid-1984, found two studies that were indirectly related to personality and performance in retail and one that dealt with the topic directly. The indirect studies, which used variables that are arguably not personality measures, showed that vigor (Cotham 1969) was related to feelings of self-worth but not related to sales and that perceived power (Weaver 1969) was related to sales success. The study that dealt directly with personality showed that an outgoing personality was positively related to sales success in retail sales (Spivey, Munson, and Locander 1979).

As part of this study, an extensive literature review was done to add to the work discussed above. This review focused on empirical research in the services area, which includes retailing (Berry 1986). Pure personal selling roles (e.g., selling life insurance) were excluded from the review because they represent a different role than that of a retail service provider, and because other reviews have concentrated in this area (Churchill, Ford, Hartley, and Walker 1985; Weitz 1981). The literature was searched from 1971 to 1996 using ABI Inform and PsychLit to identify academic articles on topics related to the study. A summary of this literature review appears in Table 1.

A few things are clear from the literature over the past 25 years. First, little research has been published in retailing concerning the effects of personality on service quality. Second, only a few studies have used customer service as the dependent variable in examining the association be-

TABLE 1
Review of Research on Personality and Performance in Retail and Service Roles

<i>Study</i>	<i>Field</i>	<i>Dependent Variable (DV)</i>	<i>Independent Variable (IV)</i>	<i>R</i>	<i>Notes</i>
Barrick and Mount (1991)	Various	Various (Performance)	Conscientiousness	.20	Meta-analysis
Day and Silverman (1989)	Accounting	Client relations	Extroversion	.18	
			Work orientation	.38	
			Interpersonal orientation	.36***	
Dubinsky and Hartley (1986)	Retail	Self-monitoring	Role conflict	.26	
			Role ambiguity	.20	
Eastburg, Williamson, Gorsuch, and Ridley (1994)	Nursing	Burnout	Extroversion	.17***	(1) support
Ferris, Bergin, and Wayne (1988)	Teaching	Absenteeism	Independence	.17***	(1) gender
			Anxiety control	.17***	
George (1989)	Retail	Various	Positiveness of mood	.23	Tenure
				-.38	Turnover
				-.28	Absenteeism
				.34	Affectivity
George (1991)	Retail	Customer service	Positiveness of mood	.26	
Hogan, Hogan, and Busch (1984)	Various	Service ratings	Service orientation	.31	Nurses
				.42	Nurses
				.25	Clerical
				.34	Truck drivers
Hollenbeck (1989)	Retail	Various	Self-consciousness	-.24	Job satisfaction
				-.27	Commitment
				-.27	Turnover
Rafaeli and Sutton (1990)	Retail	Positive emotion	Busyness	.27	
			Customer demands	.37	
Rosse, Miller, and Barnes (1991)	Health care	Service ratings	Service orientation	.19***	
Schaubroeck, Ganster, and Camera (1994)	Police and fire	Cardiovascular disorder	Type A behavior	.26***	
Stewart, Carson, and Cardy (1996)	Hotel	Self-directed behavior	Conscientiousness	.27	
			Agreeableness	.20***	
			Adjustment	.24	

All correlations are significant at $p \leq .05$ unless marked with *** in which case $p \leq .10$. *R*s are unadjusted for attenuation in correlation due to measurement unreliability or restriction of range.

(1) Reported correlations are between the DV and the IV $\times$ Support or Gender interaction.

tween personality and service performance. These studies are Day and Silverman (1989); Rosse, Miller, and Barnes (1991); and Hogan, Hogan, and Busch (1984)—all of which examine customer service directly. The Day and Silverman (1989) study showed that work orientation (achievement + endurance – play) and interpersonal orientation (affiliation + nurturance + exhibition + social recognition – aggression and dependence) were related to client relations. The other two studies focused on the service orientation construct defined earlier. Although all three of these studies examine some measure of customer service, none of these studies were conducted in the retail arena. Other studies measure general service performance or related measures such as self-direction or empowerment. Third, whereas a number of studies have shown that the relationship between personality and performance is statistically significant, in some cases the relationship is weak and in others the relationship is stronger. This is not surprising because situational factors have been shown to affect the relationship between personality and performance (Churchill et al. 1985; Weitz 1981).

Recently, some work has been done to develop a classification scheme for services to understand the situational factors that influence the degree of importance of personality to service quality. Hurley (1998) suggested that the personality of the service provider will have a greater effect in service environments where the relationship aspect of service is high in importance, where customer expectations for service are high, and where the costs to switch are low.

METHODOLOGY

A retail chain that operated 175 fast-food convenience stores in four areas of the United States participated in this study. Each store sold gasoline, grocery items, beverages, and fast-food (pizza, sandwiches, hot dogs, etc.). The stores were large for fast-food convenience stores (3,000 to 5,000 sq. ft.) and from 2 to 10 people would be working in the store on a shift depending on the volume of the store. Proprietary research conducted by this company in the past had highlighted that the friendliness of service accounted

for a substantial portion of the variance in overall customer satisfaction.

Using the taxonomy offered by Hurley (1998), the service context of this study can be defined as being low in relationship importance, moderate to low in customer expectations, and low in switching costs. Customers in fast-food convenience stores are primarily interested in obtaining products conveniently and have limited expectations regarding personal service. This setting was chosen for this exploratory research for two reasons. First, this retail environment is similar to many others (grocery stores, gas stations, discount stores, etc.) and it provides a conservative environment to test the notion of a direct relationship between personality and customer service. If an effect were found in this retail setting, it would suggest that work concerning personality in other service environments would be fruitful. Second, this setting offered a good environment to test managers' implicit theories that personality had an effect on service behaviors. Executives in the focal company clearly held this view.

This research was done by holding role constant (because all the employees surveyed performed the same job functions) while measuring the variance in personality. In addition, only specific dimensions of personality that were hypothesized to be related to customer service in this environment were measured. It is important to note that this study takes a very micro view. The focus was on the effect of personality rather than all the factors that might affect customer service. As such, variables such as intelligence, supervision, and how much the service employee depended on the job, which clearly influence customer service, were not examined. Four different studies were conducted to explore various aspects of personality and customer service: an exploratory study, a scale-development study, a "known groups" study, and a correlation study. These studies are discussed, in turn, next.

Exploratory Study

The purpose of this study was to generate a list of superior-service attributes and explore how they may relate to personality traits. To identify the relevant dimensions of personality in the specific context of fast-food convenience stores, interviews and focus groups were conducted with customers, store managers, and salespeople. For customers, the author made use of secondary data that the company had collected from telephone interviews with shoppers who were selected at random. These interviews were conducted as part of the company's ongoing customer-satisfaction measurement program. Customers were asked their overall rating of the company and were then asked to give their reasons for their evaluation. Out of a total of 800 interviews, 38 percent of the customers mentioned employees in their explanation of their overall rating. Specific employee-related reasons that customers mentioned were that salespeople were (in decreasing order based on frequency) friendly, fast/quick, good service providers in general, nice, courteous/polite, helpful, and pleasant.

To obtain the store managers' perspective, 8 store managers were selected randomly for in-depth telephone interviews. When asked to describe the personality of the ideal customer service person, the managers mentioned a variety of traits. These traits are (in decreasing order based on frequency of mention) outgoing, friendly, happy, smile a lot, helpful, good self-esteem, honest, self-confident, positive attitude, clean and care about their appearance, enjoy people, fast, not self-centered, and tolerant of stress.

Finally, a focus group was conducted with a randomly selected group of 10 frontline salespeople who were also asked to describe the personality of the ideal service provider. A content analysis of the focus group comments surfaced the following attributes: likes being with people, patient, understanding, caring, positive attitude, helpful, happy.

The attributes identified in this exploratory research provide a general description of the observable behavior of good service providers. Many of the attributes mentioned by customers and store personnel are intuitive in their relationship with customer service; however, they are not personality constructs. As John (1990) has noted in discussing such attributes, "Although these terms presuppose some traits in that individual, they do not indicate the psychological dispositions that give rise to the individual's dazzling or irritating effect on others" (p. 68). To study personality and service behavior, using methods grounded in personality research, requires linking descriptors used by customers and employees to higher level personality constructs.

Personality dimensions are abstractions of behavior (e.g., extroversion) or dispositional forces that are related to various behaviors or behavioral syndromes (e.g., a need to be with people and interact). John (1989) empirically related natural language descriptions of people to dimensions of personality. It is possible to connect the trait descriptors found in the exploratory study to three of the dimensions of personality defined by John (1989):

<i>Personality Dimension (Hogan and Hogan 1992)</i>	<i>Adjectives Associated With the Personality Dimension (John 1989)</i>	<i>Adjectives From Exploratory Study</i>
Extroversion—the need for attention and social interaction	High—outgoing, sociable, talkative, assertive, active Low—quiet, reserved, retiring, silent, withdrawn	Likes being with people, outgoing
Agreeableness—the need for pleasant and harmonious relations	High—cooperative, forgiving, friendly, helpful, pleasant, warm, kind Low—fault finding, cold, unfriendly, and unkind	Caring, patient, friendly, nice, helpful
Adjustment—the degree to which the world is experienced as threatening and beyond his or her control	High—stable, calm, contented Low—moody, tense, self-punishing, anxious, nervous, temperamental	Happy, good self-esteem, positive

Comparing the trait descriptors found in the exploratory study and the descriptors for extroversion, agreeableness, and adjustment found by John (1989) provides a basis for

hypothesizing that these broad dimensions of personality may be related to customer service. Moreover, these three dimensions of personality found to be relevant in this retail setting are similar to the three dimensions (adjustment, sociability, and likability) found to be related to service orientation in the Hogan, Hogan, and Busch (1984) study. This similarity offers some degree of convergent validity for the identified dimensions. Combining insights from the exploratory study with those from the literature reviewed suggests that service providers whose personalities reflect higher levels of extroversion, agreeableness, and adjustment are more likely to exhibit the desired service behaviors in retail settings on a consistent basis. It follows that such people are more likely to be seen by others (customers, coworkers, and supervisors) as being better service providers. The following study hypotheses formalize these inferences:

- H1:** Service providers in a retail setting who rate themselves higher on extroversion will be seen by supervisors and coworkers as providing better customer service.
- H2:** Service providers in a retail setting who rate themselves higher on agreeableness will be seen by supervisors and coworkers as providing better customer service.
- H3:** Service providers in a retail setting who rate themselves higher on adjustment will be seen by supervisors and coworkers as providing better customer service.

Scale-Development Study

It was not possible to gain agreement to use an existing personality inventory in this field setting for a number of reasons. First, the management of the company felt that most instruments were too lengthy and would place an undue barrier to attracting people in this relatively low-wage labor market. Second, executives at the company felt that for many of the existing instruments, the preferred answers were obvious and thus it would be easy for potential employees to manipulate the test scores. Bernardin (1987) presented evidence that deliberate distortion is a problem with transparent personality instruments when used for employment screening purposes. From a psychological measurement perspective, where face validity is high (i.e., it is clear what items are attempting to measure), predictive validity may be low due to faking. The forced-choice scale can help control or eliminate such deliberate faking of responses (Bernardin 1987). Therefore, a forced-choice type personality instrument was developed for this study.

The development and validation of the personality scales followed the methods recommended by Churchill (1979) and Comrey (1988). First, the construct domain was established on the basis of the exploratory study of customer service behaviors. Second, sample items were generated to measure the personality constructs in that domain. Multiple items were written to measure different

aspects of each trait using a forced-choice format. In writing items, a number of widely used forced-choice type personality inventories were used as a guide (Myers Briggs Type Indicator, 16PF). A draft questionnaire was developed and shown to different company personnel to ensure face validity and that there were no extreme social desirability biases; that is, clear response preferences were not apparent in any of the response pairings. This led to a number of items being dropped from the item pool.

Third, a 52-item survey was created and administered to all employee candidates at the company for a 6-month period to obtain a sample size large enough for factor analysis purposes. A total of 580 employee candidates filled out the survey. This survey was used for research purposes and not employee selection. Selection was based on an interview conducted by the store manager and about 50 percent of the employee candidates were ultimately hired. Factor analysis was performed by using principal components with varimax rotation because this is the recommended method in personality measurement (Comrey 1988; Hogan and Hogan 1992; McCrae and Costa 1989; Noerager 1979). Criteria consistent with those recommended by Hair, Anderson, Tatham, and Black (1995) and Comrey (1988) led to a three-factor solution. Specifically, the scree plot and the eigenvalue-greater-than-one criterion both suggested retaining three factors, thereby supporting the *a priori* three-dimensional conceptualization.

The scales were further purified iteratively through factor analysis and reliability analysis. Using the criterion of .30 or greater as significant (Hair et al. 1995), items that loaded highly on multiple factors, or whose loading was less than .30, were eliminated from further analysis. Reliability analyses were done on the scales, and items were eliminated if deletion improved the alpha coefficient. It should be noted that the factor analysis was done to establish the relationship between the items and their construct domain as well as the dimensionality of the measures; that is, the purpose was to establish content validity and not construct validity.

Churchill (1979) made the point that factor and reliability analyses only help establish content validity. Hogan and Nicholson (1988) provide an exhaustive treatment of this issue in personality measurement. They point out that a far better measure of validity of dispositional measures is their correlation with constructs they are hypothesized to be related to and a lack of correlation with constructs they are hypothesized not to be related to. To assess construct validity, a convenience sample of 43 students was given the purified instrument (hereafter referred to as the Customer Service Personality or CSP Scale) and the Hogan Personality Profile (HPI) on two separate occasions 1 week apart. The HPI was chosen because it has been validated in many academic (Hogan and Hogan 1992; Hogan et al. 1984; Rosse, Miller, and Barnes 1991) and commercial studies (Hogan and Hogan 1992).

The employee candidate sample was mostly female (76.2%) and most respondents ranged from 16 to 45 years old (76.9%). Results from the factor and reliability analyses in Table 2 show that items loaded on their expected

TABLE 2
Personality Scales

<i>Scale Name and Items</i>	<i>Factor Loading</i>	<i>Alpha</i>
Extroversion		.72
People would describe you as being (0) soft spoken and reserved (1) energetic and bubbly	.69	
Are you usually (0) quiet (1) talkative	.65	
Which describes you best (0) reserved (1) outgoing	.64	
If you were at a party, would you (0) talk to your closest friends (1) talk to most of the people	.61	
If you were waiting for a bus with a stranger, would you rather (0) read something (1) make conversation	.59	
Which is worse, people who (0) talk too much (1) talk too little	.44	
It is more fun to be (0) doing interesting work (1) part of a good team	.37	
Would people say you are (0) hard to get to know (1) easy to get to know	.35	
Adjustment		.65
Which describes you best (0) hopeful (1) successful	.50	
Your parents would have been more likely to say (0) you could have done even better (1) we are proud of you	.50	
Do you more frequently find yourself (0) not content with your life (1) content with your life	.50	
If you could live your life over, would you (0) make a lot of changes (1) make very few changes	.46	
If you had children, would you want them to be (0) more like someone you know (1) more like you	.46	
In general your life is (0) could be better (1) pretty good	.45	
When people see you coming, they are (0) indifferent (1) glad	.40	
Would you rather be (0) off to the side (1) at the center of attention	.35	
Adjusting to new things is (0) hard for you (1) easy for you	.34	
Your family is (0) helpful to you (1) proud of you	.34	
Which describes you best (0) orderly (1) friendly	.31	
Agreeableness		.66
Which describes you best (0) intense (1) patient	.73	
Do you tend to be (0) intense (1) easygoing	.61	
People that know you would say you are (0) demanding (1) understanding	.59	
Which describes you best (0) determined (1) understanding	.43	
Which describes you best (0) determined (1) cheerful	.34	
Variance extracted by factor scores		25.1%

latent constructs. The overall variance extracted by the factor analysis with the final 24 items was 25.1 percent, indicating that there is a good deal of variance in the individual items that is not accounted for by the factor scores (Hair et al. 1995). However, this is common for personality factors (see Hogan and Hogan 1992), which are heterogeneous constructs. For this reason, and to facilitate replication research, hypothesis testing proceeded by using summated scales rather than factor scores.

Although two of the scale alphas are slightly below the recommended .7 level, this is not uncommon for personality scales that use only two-category items (e.g., forced-choice). For instance, Peterson's (1994) extensive study of alpha coefficients shows that the number of scale categories has a material effect on alpha coefficients. In over 200 studies with two-category scales, Peterson (1994) noted that half of the scales had alpha coefficients below .7. Moreover, personality dimensions are heterogeneous constructs, representing abstractions of behavior or behavioral syndromes. Because scale internal consistency is affected by underlying heterogeneity of the construct being measured (Nunnally and Bernstein 1994), alphas in the .6 to .7

range are common for personality scales. Many of the most widely used personality instruments and scales have alphas of less than .7 as reported in the *Mental Measurement Yearbook* (Conoley-Close and Impara 1995; Kramer and Conoley-Close 1992).

The results of the cross-validation analysis using the student sample appear in Table 3. An examination of the constructs that should be correlated based on personality theory (underlined numbers) shows that the scales in the CSP instrument correlate significantly with related measures in the HPI. Furthermore, they do not correlate with measures of variables in the HPI that are conceptually different. This cross-validation, along with the factor and reliability analyses, provides evidence for the overall validity of the three scales in the CSP instrument.

Known Groups Study

Once the validity of the CSP scales had been demonstrated, an attempt was made to determine whether people who delivered superior customer service were more extroverted, agreeable, and better adjusted. The first test con-

TABLE 3
Scale Correlation—Convergent and Discriminant Validity

<i>Hogan Scales (Scale and Alpha)^b</i>	<i>CSP^a Scales (Scale and Alpha)</i>		
	<i>Extroversion (8, .72)</i>	<i>Adjustment (11, .65)</i>	<i>Agreeableness (5, .66)</i>
Empathy (5, .65)	-.14	.16	.50**
No Depression (6, .69)	-.04	.66**	-.09
Not Anxious (4, .75)	-.13	.38**	.15
Like People (6, .67)	.48**	.03	-.08
Adjustment (37, .89)	-.1	.51**	.32*
Service Orientation (14, .69)	-.06	.31*	.57**

NOTE: $N = 43$. The constructs that should be correlated based on personality theory are italicized.

a. CSP = Customer Service Personality scale.

b. The scale alphas for the Hogan Personality Inventory are from the validation manual for the instrument where data from over 10,000 people are reported.

* $p \leq .05$. ** $p \leq .01$, one tailed test.

cerning this question involved 100 "good" service personnel and 100 "poor" service personnel who were categorized into these known groups by store and district managers. Salespeople who had been working at the company prior to the start of this research program were nominated on the basis of the degree to which they delivered good customer service. Store and district managers were also asked independently to nominate people until a sample of 100 people were obtained for each group. The use of supervisor ratings, in relating personality to performance, has strong precedent in sales management research (Churchill et al. 1985; Comer and Dubinsky 1985).

The participating company had a clear operationalization of "good customer service" that was part of training and store inspections and that matched Berman and Evans's (1995) description of basic levels of expected service in retail. Behaviors that defined good customer service were greeting the customer, making eye contact, smiling, asking how they could help, and after performing the requested service, asking if there was anything else they could help with. All of the empirical tests in this article relate service providers' self-reports (personality) with others' ratings of customer service. None of the items in the personality instrument mention customer service or customer service behaviors (smiling, eye contact, courtesy, etc.). Conversely, none of the customer service ratings mention personality or even personality trait descriptors. This approach is consistent with prior research on personality and behavior. Framing the personality variables differently from the customer service variables, and using "self" ratings as the independent variable and "other" ratings as the dependent variable, avoids common-method issues and confounds.

The agreement between district and store manager raters was 0.85, that is, 85 percent of the district managers and store managers agreed as to whether the person was a good or poor service provider. Where there was no agreement between the store and district managers' nomination, the employee was dropped from the sample. The personality instrument was sent to each group. The final sample included 58 good service providers and 32 poor service providers. It came as no surprise that the employees rated as better service providers by their supervisors were more

cooperative in responding to the survey. To provide an indication of whether nonrespondents were similar to those who responded, two groups were formed: those that responded to the initial request and those that responded only after a follow-up request. The mean scores on the three personality variables showed no statistically significant differences. This suggests that it is reasonable to conclude that nonrespondents were similar to respondents.

The known-groups sample was predominantly female (97.9%) and the age of respondents ranged from 16 to over 55. The distribution of CSP scores for the known-groups sample was similar to the overall sample except for the adjustment variable. The known-groups sample had a lower mean score and more variability on the adjustment dimension. This is because a deliberate attempt was made to include poor service providers in the known-groups sample.

Logistic regression was used to analyze these data because this procedure offers more diagnostic information than discriminant analysis in examining the effect of independent variables on a dichotomous dependent variable (supervisor rating of good or poor service). To summarize, the results in the known-groups study indicate that personality and customer service are significantly related. The results of this analysis, which appear in Table 4, show that H1, H2, and H3 are supported. The Wald chi-square statistic, which measures the significance of the beta coefficients of the independent variables, indicated that extroversion and adjustment were significant at the $p \leq .05$ level and agreeableness was significant at the $p \leq .08$ level.

The overall equation was significant indicating that the model with the personality variables performed better than the null model ($\chi^2 22.1, p \leq .0001$). The "-2 log likelihood," which measures the goodness of fit of the model, indicates that the personality model predicts performance better than the null model (-2 log likelihood: null model, 117.1; personality model, 94.5). Two additional approaches were used to assess the goodness of fit of the personality model. First, using the formula specified by Hair et al. (1995) for computing the R^2 value based on the change in the -2 log likelihood, the personality model had an R^2 value of 19 percent, which indicates a modest fit. The second approach was to examine the classification table.

TABLE 4
Known-Groups Study Results

Logistic Regression Analysis				
Variable	β	SE β	Wald	Significance
Extroversion	.05	.03	3.9	.05
Adjustment	.06	.03	3.8	.05
Agreeableness	.07	.04	3.0	.08
Constant	4.34	1.33	10.65	.001
-2 log likelihood	94.5			
Model χ^2	22.1		$p \leq .0001$	

Classification Table			
Observed	Predicted		Percentage Correct
	Good	Poor	
Good	53	5	91.3
Poor	17	15	46.8
Overall			75.5

Personality Variable	Group Means				F	Significance
	Good Group		Poor Group			
	M	SD	M	SD		
Extroversion	34.1	8.4	25.4	12.9	15.0	.001
Adjustment	35.4	8.0	26.4	12.3	17.7	.001
Agreeableness	24.2	4.8	20.6	8.5	6.3	.01

The classification table shows that the model with personality correctly classified 76 percent of the employees. When the analysis was done, using a holdout sample, the overall classification percentage using the estimation model increased slightly to 77 percent, and the accuracy for good service providers relative to poor service providers was the same. Using both the maximum-chance criterion (64%) and the more robust proportional-chance criterion (53.8%), computed on the basis of the formulas specified by Hair et al. (1995), the classification percentage using the personality model (76%) indicates a good model fit. The model does better than chance under all prior group membership probability assumptions, which indicates a good fit (Hair et al. 1995). The model did a better job of classifying good service providers (91% correct) than it did in classifying poor service providers (47%). This is most likely because the estimation model included a larger sample of good service providers than it did poor service providers.

A univariate *F* test of the group mean scores indicated that there were significant differences between the groups on all three personality measures ($p \leq .01$). Service providers who were rated as good by superiors were significantly more extroverted, agreeable, and well-adjusted than the poor service provider group.

Collectively, the results of the known-groups study indicate that there are significant differences in personality between the good and the poor service providers, and that personality variables are useful in predicting group membership. To determine if similar results would be obtained using peer ratings of customer service behavior, another study was conducted.

Correlation Study

In this study, customer service rating surveys were sent to peers of the 300 people who were eventually hired by the company after the initial screening (i.e., they had already filled out the personality questionnaire) 90 days after the new person had begun work at the company. Justification for the use of employee ratings was found in the exploratory study, which indicated a strong correspondence in the language used to describe service quality between customers and employees. Also, in a small store with quick customer transactions, the way customers are treated by employees is highly visible and evident to coworkers who are only a few feet away from the service provider. This is especially true in this setting because all employees were trained using a common set of criteria defining excellence in customer service (greeting, smile, eye contact, etc.).

The use of aggregate peer ratings of customer service as a surrogate for customer ratings is supported by prior studies that have shown a correlation between employee and customer ratings of service (Schneider and Bowen 1985) and by research in sales management, where peers or managers have commonly been used as expert informants in rating performance (Churchill et al. 1985). It is important to recognize that although peer perceptions are a valid indicator of customer service, they are not identical to customers' perceptions. This article addresses personality's effect on customer service behaviors but does not examine how customers themselves react to these behaviors.

All of the employees sampled had been through the same training and had been with the company for about the same period of time when data were collected. Of 300 people, usable peer surveys were obtained for 106 people for a response rate of 35 percent. Through follow-up interviews with store managers, it was determined that those who did not respond were working in stores that were under staffing pressure due to growth and the need to hire more people. The data collection process was too obtrusive for these stores, resulting in noncompliance. An analysis of two waves of responses (initial versus follow-up) was done to make sure that nonrespondents were similar to those who responded. The differences between the group means on the customer service rating were not significant, which suggests that nonrespondents were similar to respondents.

The peer raters provided an overall evaluation of customer service using the same operationalization of customer service behavior as in the known groups study (smiling, greeting, etc.). In this study, however, a 4-point scale (1 = *excellent* to 4 = *poor*) was used. For clarity of

presentation, this scale was reverse scored so that higher ratings indicate better customer service. Peers rated each service provider by using this single-item scale to assess overall customer service on the basis of their assessment of the degree to which the person demonstrated the required customer service behaviors. On average, five people who had worked with the new employee rated each person. Because the validity of the dependent variable was so critical, and Lastovicka and Joachimsthaler (1988) suggested having multiple raters and multiple observations for improving the detection of personality effects, if an employee did not have at least three peer ratings and if each peer did not observe the service provider on multiple occasions, they were excluded from the analysis. This reduced the sample for the study to 76 people.

Peers were asked to indicate the number of times they had worked with the service provider to be sure that there was an adequate basis in experience for the rating. Peer raters had an excellent basis for making an overall evaluation of the customer service behaviors because the minimum number of times that peers had worked with a service provider was three. Interrater agreement among peer raters was calculated by using the index for determining levels of agreement in samples with varying numbers of raters (James, Demaree, and Wolf 1984). The reliability of the dependent variable measure was excellent (mean IRR [Inter-Rater Reliability] = .76; range = .40 to 1) based on James, Demaree, and Wolf (1984).

The correlation study sample was more balanced between men and women (78.2%) and younger (56.4% between 16 and 25) than the known-groups sample. The results of the correlation analysis, which appear in Table 5, confirmed H1 and H2 concerning extroversion and agreeableness but did not support H3 concerning adjustment (extroversion and agreeableness, $r = -.21$ and $r = -.20$, respectively; $p \leq .05$). Service providers who saw themselves as more extroverted and agreeable were rated as superior on customer service by their coworkers. Age and gender did not influence the results because there was no change when these variables were controlled for in the analysis.

DISCUSSION

Three questions were of interest in this research: (1) Is there such a thing as a service-oriented personality? (2) What dimensions of personality are most important? and (3) What is the magnitude of the influence on performance? Regarding the first question, in the context of fast-food convenience stores, personality traits conducive to good customer service do appear to exist. Evidence of this is demonstrated in a number of ways in this article. First, significant relationships were found in the known-groups and correlation studies between customer service performance and personality. Second, statistically significant correlations were found between two of the personality dimensions in the CSP (adjustment and agreeableness) and the Hogan Service Orientation scale, which has previously

TABLE 5
Correlational Study Results

Variable	1	2	3
1. Customer service rating			
2. Extroversion	.21**		
3. Adjustment	.01	.26**	
4. Agreeableness	.20**a,b	.11	.13

NOTE: $N = 76$.

a. When adjusted for attenuation due to unreliability, the correlation for both extroversion and agreeableness with customer service is .28.

Adjustment for unreliability = $r_{xy} / \sqrt{r_{xx}r_{yy}}$ (Cohen and Cohen 1983)

b. A comparison of this sample with the overall sample shows that there is restriction in range operating with the agreeableness variable. The sample of employees in the correlation study is more agreeable and more homogeneous than the overall sample. After adjusting for range restriction, the correlation between agreeableness and customer service is .27. If both the range restriction and unreliability corrections are made, the correlation with customer service is .38.

Adjustment for restriction of range = $r_{xcy} (SD_x / SD_{xc}) / 1 + r^2_{xcy} (SD_x^2 / SD_{xc}^2 - 1)$,

where SD_{xc} equals the curtailed sample standard deviation and SD_x the unrestricted sample standard deviation (Cohen and Cohen 1983).

* $p \leq .05$. ** $p \leq .01$, one-tailed test.

been shown to be related to service performance. Finally, at a more general level, the literature review located a number of studies that have found significant relationships between personality and various aspects of service performance.

In terms of the specific dimensions of personality that matter, we can say that in this retail setting, extroversion and agreeableness are related to customer service. These variables were significant in the known-groups and the correlation studies. The results here loosely parallel other studies of personality and service performance. Work by Hogan, Hogan, and Busch (1984) and Rosse, Miller, and Barnes (1991) suggested that service orientation was related to agreeableness (they called it likability) and sociability. The Day and Silverman (1989) study noted that client relations were related to the interpersonal orientation (affiliation, nurturance, exhibition, social recognition). The empirical results in this article, combined with these other studies, suggest that there is a relationship between dimensions of personality that concern how a person relates to others (agreeableness and extroversion) and performance in some service roles.

The findings for the adjustment dimension, which has more to do with how a person feels about himself or herself, were less clear. The relationship between adjustment and customer service was significant in the known-groups study but not in the correlation study. Although it is only conjecture, there is some evidence from prior research that suggests that adjustment may adversely affect performance when it is very high or very low. People who are very high on adjustment can be overconfident and

ignore feedback, and people who are very low in adjustment can be overly tense, moody, and self-punishing (Hogan and Hogan 1992). This may explain why adjustment was only significant in the known-groups study, which had the most variance in adjustment ($SD = 10.54$ vs. 7.18 in the correlation study). In any event, although it is possible that extremely high or low scores on adjustment may be predictive of poor customer service, there appears to be no strong linear relationship between adjustment and performance in the service role.

The last question posed in this article, regarding the magnitude of the impact of personality, is perhaps the most important question and one that has plagued personality research. As noted in the introduction to the empirical portion of this article, only modest personality effects were expected in the service setting chosen for this study. The results were consistent with this expectation. The known-groups study showed that the use of personality variables improves prediction of customer service ability over chance and that about 19 percent of the variance in supervisor ratings of customer service was explained by personality. For the two personality variables that were significant in the correlation study, the correlation ranged from .20 to .38 depending on the degree of correction made for unreliability and restriction of range. Again, this range of correlation did not offer compelling evidence that the magnitude of the personality effect is large in this service setting.

Examining the correlations in the studies reported in Table 1 sheds further light on the question of the magnitude of the personality effect in services. When the correlations reported are converted to an R^2 , the percentage of variance explained by personality ranges from 3 in the Barrick and Mount (1991) study to 18 in the Hogan, Hogan, and Busch (1984) study. Where studies specifically reported changes in R^2 because of personality, the percentage of variance explained ranged from 3 in the Ferris, Bergin, and Wayne (1988) study to 19 in the George (1989) study. The percentage of variance explained in the correlation study reported here (4% to 14% with correction for attenuation) is consistent with this range as was the R^2 in the known-groups study (19%). On the basis of the evidence reviewed in this article, it appears that the percentage of variance in service performance that can be explained by personality probably ranges somewhere between 3 and 20. The exact percentage of variance explained will to some degree depend on the number of personality variables measured, the reliability of the independent and dependent variables, and situational factors inherent in the service that affect the relative importance of service provider personality to customers. Thus, the answer to the question about the magnitude of the impact of personality is that in some service settings, and with some research approaches, the magnitude is large and for others it is quite small. For certain services, exploring the relationship between personality and service performance appears to be a fruitful area for further research.

The question of the magnitude of personality effects also has an important practical side. The management of

the retail organization that participated in this study had a strong belief that if they hired people with a certain personality profile, it would virtually assure good customer service. In fact, when asked what they would look for in hiring good customer service people, 50 percent of the district managers in this organization mentioned personality as a selection criterion. However, the results in this study suggest that researchers and retail managers consider the possibility that in some service settings, attribution biases may be operating, namely, the fundamental attribution error of over attributing causation to dispositional causes (Heider 1958). Executives in this, and other service organizations, may attribute more causation to internal dispositional attributes of the employees than is justified. Research has demonstrated (Ross and Fletcher 1985) that people have a bias toward attributing cause to permanent structures (i.e., dispositions) because such attributions satisfy their need for a structured and stable world. Thus, it may be more comforting to attribute poor service to dispositional defects than to deal with the multitude of situational, and even random, factors that might affect customer service behavior.

Another practical consideration concerning the magnitude of personality effects relates to the size of the labor pool from which service providers are selected. When a large labor pool exists, organizations can use more stringent cutoffs with personality and other screening criteria to increase the probability of hiring service-oriented workers. When a very small labor pool exists, cut points will have to be less stringent and the error rate will necessarily increase even in situations where the personality-customer service correlation is high. Personality measures will have more practical utility in improving customer service for service positions that attract larger numbers of employee candidates.

This article suggests that it is important to take an interactionist perspective that emphasizes both the situational and dispositional factors shaping behavior. Personality matters, however, it seems to matter more in some services than in others. Furthermore, personality dimensions that have to do with how people relate to others offer promise for theory development and improved practice in both service marketing and management.

Limitations and Future Research

There are some limitations that should be recognized in interpreting the findings in this article as well as some learning that can inform future research. Limitations are reviewed first, followed by ideas for future research.

Generalizability. Care should be taken not to generalize the empirical findings in this study to other service settings that are not similar to the fast-food convenience store environment. Although some retail environments are similar to this setting, others are not and there is ample evidence that situational factors influence the relationship between within-person factors and performance.

Personality variables. A limited number of personality dimensions were examined based on prior research, the exploratory study, and the fact that a very specific dependent variable (customer service) was of interest. It is possible that other dimensions of personality might be related to performance in this type of job. One possibility that was not examined was conscientiousness. If we frame the display of customer service behaviors as being related to compliance with rules and norms in a service organization, it is possible that conscientiousness, which has to do with willingness to follow rules, may be related to customer service.

Personality measurement. As with other personality scales that use two-category scales and measure heterogeneous latent constructs, the scales used in this research showed somewhat low reliability as measured by coefficient alpha. This must be considered a limitation in this study. Although the forced-choice (dichotomous) approach used in this study is common in personality measurement, improved reliability may result from using a semantic differential scale with multiple response categories (e.g., a 5-point scale). More narrow, less heterogeneous personality constructs that use more items and more than three response categories are likely to have greater reliability and possibly higher correlation with service performance measures.

Customer service measures. This article examined customer service behaviors but did not address the degree to which customers are affected by these behaviors. In some service situations, it is possible that personality has a large effect in shaping service behavior but that customers are unaffected by the resultant behavior. Future research should examine the impact of personality on service behavior and go further to determine its ultimate effect on customer reactions in different service settings.

A number of implications for future research derive from this work.

Choice of dependent variables. Future research concerning the effect of personality in retail and service contexts should include more than customer service as the dependent variable. Variables such as attendance, turnover, cash and inventory shortages, teamwork, and others should be studied to determine if they are influenced by personality. Focusing primarily on customer service, even though it provides more focus and opportunity for theory building, may underestimate the impact of personality on overall performance. Also, the time and money invested by companies in personality testing will have greater utility if a wider spectrum of performance criteria can be predicted.

Situational factors. Future research should examine situational factors that might influence the magnitude of the effect of personality. The service setting in this study involved brief and routine customer interaction; therefore, the opportunity for employees to affect customer perceptions was limited. Situational factors across service settings can be expected to influence both the degree to which personality affects service provider behavior and the de-

gree to which displaying the expected service behavior will be noticed and valued by consumers.

Effect of adaptability. Future research should deal with the question of how much adaptability, or ability to self-monitor, moderates the effect of dispositional factors on performance. This study concentrated on dispositional variables and ignored the fact that people can be motivated to adapt their behavior to situational demands despite personal preferences. Work by Paulhus and Martin (1988) suggested that researchers measure behavioral capability rather than personality traits; the difference is subtle but important. A measure of behavioral capability asks respondents how easy or difficult it is for them to act in certain ways. Adaptability is implied and respondents are simply asked their degree of comfort in projecting various types of behavior. This approach to measurement recognizes the interaction between people and roles explicitly. People can adapt to roles but there is variance in their comfort in doing so, depending on who they are (personality) and the type of behavior to be projected (role requirements).

Personality measures. Research is needed using broad-scale personality inventories that measure personality at different levels of abstraction; that is, a combination of homogeneous scales tapping into narrow personality dimensions (e.g., empathy) and heterogeneous scales that tap into more global constructs (e.g., agreeableness). Personality instruments such as the HPI, the California Psychological Inventory, and the NEO Personality Inventory are excellent candidates for further research in services marketing because they cover a wide spectrum of personality dimensions and have been well validated.

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